

Riddling traditions in eastern Indonesia and East Timor: some preliminary notes¹

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Telling riddles (Indonesian *teka-teki*) is a widespread (although often little noticed) tradition throughout insular Southeast Asia. In this paper, I begin by outlining the extent of occurrence of riddling throughout the archipelago (as far as this can be gleaned from the literature). The main focus of the paper will be an examination of riddling traditions in Nusa Tenggara Timur and Timor Leste. I begin by sketching out the primary social functions of riddling. Riddles may be told to encourage sleepless children to sleep, they may be told as part of funerary rites when they are used to help keep people awake while they watch over a newly deceased corpse before burial rites, they may be told competitively, or they may just be told for fun. I also examine the typical structure of riddles in an attempt to outline an initial typology of the forms.

Introduction

Although telling riddles is a widespread custom throughout Southeast Asia and indeed the world, it is not a verbal art form that has received much attention in recent linguistic or anthropological literature. Perhaps the best-known work on riddles in Indonesia is Stokhof (1982) who devotes a whole monograph to exemplifying and discussing riddling traditions in Kamang (called Woisika by Stokhof), a non-Austronesian language from Alor in Nusa Tenggara Timur. Other recent works I am aware of that contain some discussion of riddling traditions in Indonesia are Carr (2004) who discusses *pupuuk* 'riddles' amongst other Makasai genres and Neonbasu (2011) who describes *mantekas* 'riddles' from the Boboki dialect of Uab Meto in West Timor in a wider study of Biboki oral tradition. In earlier times, much more extensive discussion of riddling traditions from across Indonesia can be found in the works of many writers.

Riddling can be characterised as containing two elements: a problem posed by a riddler and an answer to be guessed by the riddlee. The problem is perceived as interrogative, whether explicitly coded as such or not. In general, the person being posed a riddle will recognise the problem as interrogative as soon as they have determined that the problem is, indeed, a riddle (Mould, 2002:2). George and Dundas (1963) propose a model of riddling that is based on a major distinction between oppositional/non-oppositional riddling and metaphorical/literal riddling. Oppositional riddles involve some sort of a paradox, opposition or contradiction in the puzzle. Non-oppositional riddles contain elements which are not in opposition but which puzzle the riddlee because of scant information or

¹ This paper is decidedly preliminary in nature and has been prepared simply in order to give participants at the workshop on 'special genres' in and around Indonesia to be held at the Institute for Language and Cultures of Asia and Africa (ILCAA), Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, on 17-19 February 2013. I hope to prepare a more complete paper subsequent to the workshop. At this stage, much of the secondary literature remains unchecked and exemplification is only preliminary. The current contribution is probably best seen as simply an outline prepared before a talk.

vagueness. Metaphorical riddles pose puzzles to the riddle by means of metaphor and literal riddles do not involve metaphors.

Range of riddling in Indonesia

As already noted, riddling is both widespread but often barely noted in the literature. While the existence of riddling has sometimes been noted by authors, non-existence, if it occurs is hardly ever mentioned. While non-existence of riddling has been noted in a few Indonesian cultures, any list compiled here, whether of existence or non-existence must by necessity be preliminary in nature. Indonesian itself has a tradition of riddles or *teka teki* which is widely known by speakers of the language. It may well be that these days languages which once had no tradition of riddling have adopted the genre from Indonesian. The list of languages with or without riddles from the Nusantara region which follows is largely derived from Stokhof (1982) with some additions by the present author. Many of the earlier mentioned authors include extensive collections of riddles in their writings, but as mentioned above, later work tends to ignore the genre.

| | |
|-----------|---------------------------|
| Acehnese | Kremer, 1928 |
| 'Alfuru' | Nieman, 1886 |
| Batak | van Ophuysen, 1883, 1885 |
| Bengkulu | Helfrich, 1891 |
| Besemah | Helfrich, 1985 |
| Buru | Pieters, 1922 |
| 'Dayak' | Hupe, 1896 |
| Lampung | Helfrich, 1985 |
| Madurese | Spiegel, 1894; and others |
| Makasai | Carr, 2004 |
| Nias | Sunderman, 1892, 1905 |
| Seremai | Helfrich, 1985 |
| Simalue | Jacobson, 1919 |
| Sundanese | Holle, 1869 |
| Tabaru | Fortgens, 1928 |
| Taba | Bowden, 2001 |
| Tonsea | Poenson, 1887 |
| Toraja | Kruyt, 1929; and others |
| Uab Meto | Neonbasu, 2011 |

Appropriate occasions for riddling

There appears to be quite a variation in when it is appropriate for people from different parts of Indonesia to tell riddles. For some people, riddles may be told at any time. I was told by Sundanese

villagers that they mostly tell riddles as a way of entertaining young children who are having trouble sleeping. For the Sundanese, then, riddling may be a way of encouraging young people to sleep, but for others it can be a way of staying awake. The Makasai, speakers of a non-Austronesian language from Timor-Leste (Carr, 2004) and the Eastern Toraja of Bola'ang Mongondow (Kruyt, 1929) tell riddles during the overnight vigils conducted over corpses before funeral rites. Western Toraja, on the other hand, tell riddles during harvest time (Kruyt, 1929 and Potter, 1950). While riddles tend to be told by adults to children in Sundanese, in Woisika, Stokhof reports that riddling is largely confined to adolescents. While the Kamang (Woisika) have no restrictions on when riddling should be done, married adults tend to lose interest in the practice, and in fact riddling is often performed competitively by teams who hope to impress potential suitors. Stokhof describes the functions of riddling as follows:

Of course, it is a kind of contest: creativity of formulation and acuteness of apprehension guarantees success for riddler as well as the riddle. But apart from this training in verbal play, sharpening of the wit, and development of verbal feelings and transfer of knowledge/experience, it is to my mind, first and foremost an informal way of social intercourse, a first verbal reconnoitring, a legitimate occasion for flirting which eventually results in courting... in addition, I am inclined to see the riddling contests as a remnants of reported but now obsolete initiations ceremonies, a kind of self-imposed extended rite de passage, characteristic of the transitory stage in which they find themselves: the social and physical puberty. Stokhof (1982:6).

Some riddles in Indonesian

A few Indonesian riddles culled from contemporary websites are given below:

(1) Question: *Kenapa pohon kelapa di depan rumah harus di-tebang ?*
 why tree coconut LOC front house must PASS-chop.up
 'Why is the coconut tree in front of the house chopped up?'

Answer: *Soalnya kalo dicabut berat*
 Problem-NYA if PASS-pull.out heavy
 'Because if it gets pulled out it's heavy.'

(2) Question: *Kenapa orang mati di-bungkus dengan kain kafan?*
 Why person dead PASS-wrap with fabric unbleached
 'Why is a dead person wrapped in unbleached fabric?'

ANSWER: *Kalau dikasih kain batik ntar dia ke kondangan... !*
 If PASS-give cloth batik presently 3s LOC party!
 'If s/he was given batik soon s/he'd be out to a party.'

(3) Question: *Kalo kamu di tempat gelap dan dingin dan kamu punya satu*
 If you LOC place dark and cold and you have one
korek api, di situ ada obor lilin, dan kayu bakar. apa
 lighter fire, LOC there exist torch candle and wood bake what

yang pertama-tama kamu hidup-in?
REL first-REDUP you live-APPL

'If you're in a dark place, and it's cold and you have a lighter, there is a torch there and some firewood, what do you light first?'

Answer *Korek api dong!*
lighter fire EMPH
'The lighter, stupid!'

These riddles have much of the flavour of western riddles, clearly told as jokes to children, and all rely on literal riddling in the framework of Georges and Dundes (1963). Preliminary indications are that contemporary Indonesian riddles mostly follow this pattern, but it is very likely that riddles from earlier periods also followed different sorts of patterns as exemplified in other languages below. This question awaits further enquiry.

A riddle in Taba

The following riddle is one I was told during fieldwork on Makian island during the early 1990's. It also is a very literal riddle.

- (4) *John ni wwe mhonas... nim wwe nalusa 'mhonas'.*
John ni wwe mhonas... nim wwe n=alusa mhonas.
John 3sg.POSS leg sore... 2sg.POSS leg 3sg=say sick
- Nim pappuko me nalusa 'mhonas'. Bingo namolam.*
nim pappuko me n=alusa mhonas. Bingo n=amolam.
2sg.POSS knee well 3sg=say sick. Stomach 3sg=hungry
- Wlo nmau nhan Poto pope nmau nhan nciwi.*
wlo n=mau n=han Poto po-pe n=mau n=han n=cio-i.
heart 3sg=want 3sg=go anus down-ESS 3sg=want 3sg=go 3sg=shit-3sg
- Sumo nalusa 'khan'. Mto nuyak, poyo mhonas, wlo*
Sumo n=alusa k=han. Mto n=uyak, poyo mhonas, wlo
mouth 3sg=say 1sg=go eye 3sg-tired head be.sick heart
- nmau nhan... mtumo e loe?*
n=mau n=han, m=tumo e lo=e?
3sg=want 3sg=go 2sg-follow FOC where=FOC?

'John, your leg is sore. Your leg says 'sick'. Your knee says 'sick'. Stomach is hungry. Heart wants to go. Anus down there wants to go for a shit. Mouth says 'I'm going'. Eyes are tired, head is sick, heart wants to go, which do you follow? Anus down there is about to shit itself. Which do you follow?

The answer to this puzzle is clearly that one has to take a shit first, or it is likely that disaster may ensue. When I attempted to answer this riddle, I initially gave the wrong answer and suggested that one should eat first. The fact that Taba riddling has a major function of competitive jesting is shown by the response to my incorrect answer given below, in which I was gently ridiculed for my wrong answer.

| | | | | | | | | |
|-----|------------------|--------------------|-----------------|--------------------|-----------------|-----------------|---------------|--------------|
| (5) | <i>Poto</i> | <i>pope</i> | <i>me</i> | <i>tasiak</i> | <i>i.</i> | <i>John</i> | <i>ni</i> | <i>suka</i> |
| | Poto | po-pe | me | ta-sio-ak | i. | John | ni | suka |
| | Anus | down-ESS | well | DETR-shit-APPL | 3sg | John | 3sg.POSS | desire |
| | <i>nhantuli,</i> | <i>sedangkan</i> | <i>ni</i> | <i>klolo</i> | <i>nparenta</i> | <i>nhan...</i> | <i>Han</i> | |
| | n=han.tuli, | sedangkan | ni | klolo | n=parenta | n=han... | han | |
| | 3sg=go.sleep | while | 3sg.POSS | insides | 3sg=stop | 3sg=go | go | |
| | <i>akno</i> | <i>ni</i> | <i>dawalaci</i> | <i>de</i> | <i>ncio</i> | <i>ni</i> | <i>calana</i> | |
| | ak-no | ni | dawalat=si | de | n=sio-o | ni | calana | |
| | ALL-there | 3sg.POSS | girlfriend=PL | RES | 3sg=shit-APPL | 3sg.POSS | trousers | |
| | <i>de</i> | <i>namliak</i> | <i>tit.</i> | <i>Ncuka</i> | <i>te.</i> | <i>Male</i> | <i>sio</i> | <i>malai</i> |
| | de | n=amliah-ak | tit. | n=suka | te. | Male | sio | malai |
| | RES | 3sg=laugh-APPL | 1pl.incl. | 3sg-like | NEG | must | shit | then |
| | <i>han.</i> | <i>Idia.</i> | <i>Sio</i> | <i>okik,</i> | <i>malai</i> | <i>nhantuli</i> | <i>malai</i> | <i>nhan</i> |
| | han. | I-dia. | Sio | okik, | malai | n=han.tuli | malai | n=han |
| | go | DEM-DIST | shit | finish | then | 3sg=go.sleep | then | 3sg=go |
| | <i>ronda</i> | <i>Tasiak</i> | <i>nit</i> | <i>calana...</i> | <i>Tatés!</i> | <i>Polo</i> | | |
| | ronda | Ta-sio-ak | nit | calana... | Tatés! | Polo | | |
| | walkabout | DETR-shit-APPL | 1pl.incl.POSS | trousers | crazy | if | | |
| | <i>tese,</i> | <i>cio</i> | <i>calana,</i> | <i>cio</i> | <i>jok,</i> | | | |
| | te-se | t-sio-o | calana | t-sio-o | jok, | | | |
| | NEG-POT | 1pl.incl-shit-APPL | trousers | 1pl.incl-shit-APPL | mattress | | | |
| | <i>berarti</i> | <i>masure</i> | <i>te.</i> | | | | | |
| | berarti | masure | te. | | | | | |
| | means | good | NEG. | | | | | |

'Your anus down there shits itself! John wants to go to sleep while his insides have stopped working. If you go to your girlfriend's place you'll shit your trousers and she'll laugh at us. She won't like it! You have to shit and then go for a walk. Shit our trousers? Crazy!!! If we don't shit our trousers, we'll shit our mattress. It's no good!'

A Makasai riddle

This riddle from Makasai illustrates how often the correct answer must be negotiated between riddling participants. This example includes the problem (first four lines), the suggested (but wrong) answer and its justification (the next ten lines), then nineteen further lines where the riddler justifies his answer as the correct one until the eventual acquiescence of the riddle. N and O refer to the participants in this exchange and the example is taken from Carr (2004).

(6)
N: *kareta mata u he'e,*
 *** *kareta mata u he'e*
 *** *car small one be.here*
 A little car is here

estrada mi ria,
 estrada mi ria
 street along run
 running along the street.

sa'a ria laka be'u ria mas,
 sa'a ria laka be'u ria mas
 up run CONJ can run but
 [It] runs up and [it] can run [i.e. go] but

mini gali gati ria ipa laka nokoranu.
 mini gali gati ria ipa laka nokoranu
 contrast back down run down.towards CONJ bad
 [you cannot] run down.

M: dei dawa,
 *** dei dawa
 *** thorny.plant maybe
 Dei [a thorny plant] maybe?

dei gi asa ((inaudible))
 dei gi asa ***
 thorny.plant POSS leaf ***
 The leaves of the dei ((inaudible)))

O: kadoo.
 *** kadoo
 *** small.hand.saw
 Kadoo [a small hand saw].

kadoo ate kadoo ere.
 kadoo ate kadoo ere
 small.hand.saw wood small.hand.saw DEM
 Kadoo, kadoo [used for cutting] wood.

M: kadoo ((inaudible))
 *** kadoo ***
 *** small.hand.saw ***
 Kadoo ((inaudible))

O: kadoo gi wasi ere ete buna tai.
 *** kadoo gi wasi ere ete buna tai
 *** small.hand.saw POSS tooth DEM angled CFM
 The teeth of a kadoo [are at an] angle, right.

ai ni tana mi dane isi to sa'i na'i u,
 ai ni tana mi dane isi to sa'i na'i u
 2SG EMP.P hand along move move.down no.problem
 [When] you move your hand along down [there is] no problem,

ai tanana'u rau mas ai mini gali tia gini misa,
 ai tana na'u rau mas ai mini gali tia gini misa
 2SG hand just good but 2SG contrast back towards move up
 your hand [is] just fine, but [when you] move your hand back up towards [the teeth of the saw],

ai tana ausa'i au бага.
 ai tana ausa'i au бага
 2SG hand all CMPN injure
 all your hand [gets] hurt.

M: ausa'i au бага.
 *** ausa'i au бага
 *** all CMPN injure
 All hurt. ((Said in overlap with end of preceding turn.))

N: u wa'a dei gi asa ere he'e ene,
 *** u wa'a dei gi asa ere he'e ene
 *** one EMP thorny.plant POSS leaf DEM be.here EMP
 Dei leaves [is] the one [which is the answer],

M: dei gi asa goba.
 *** dei gi asa goba
 *** thorny.plant POSS leaf also
 Dei leaves also [hurt you]. ((Said in overlap with most of preceding utterance.))

dei gi asa ausa'i halapu.
 dei gi asa ausa'i halapu
 thorny.plant POSS leaf all similar
 Dei leaves, both [lit. all] [are] similar.

O: anu mae goba tai.
 *** anu mae goba tai
 *** CL(h) two(h) also CFM
 The two of them [are] also [like this], yes.

M: ((inaudible)) i anu mitu la'a pera kaur to,
 *** *** i anu mitu la'a pera kaur to
 *** *** 2PL CL(h) three(h) go try rub.back.and.forth CONJ
 ((inaudible)) You three go [and] try rubbing [one] back and forth and

O: um.
 *** um
 *** Mm
 Mm.

M: i tana ausa'i au бага apa ere.
 *** i tana ausa'i au бага apa ere
 *** 2PL hand all CMPN injure CTY DEM
 your hands [will] all [be] hurt for sure.

O: *um.*
 *** *um*
 *** *Mm*
 Mm. (PP203; Baucau dialect)

N: *dei gi asa.*
 *** *dei gi asa*
 *** *thorny.plant POSS leaf*
 Dei leaves.

O: *na'u ta hani.*
 *** *na'u ta hani*
 *** *just RCP like*
 The two of them [are] just alike.

N: *((inaudible)) dei gi asa ere he'e.*
 *** **** dei gi asa ere he'e*
 *** **** thorny.plant POSS leaf DEM be.here*
 Dei leaves [is the correct answer].

ai ge'e au ma waidopi lolo,
ai ge'e au ma wai - dopi lolo
 2SG POSS CMPN ANA remain - behind say
 Yours was said later ((Said to O about his answer of kadoo which came after M's of dei gi asa.))

to ai rau.
to ai rau
 CONJ CONT be.good
 so leave it [lit. [it] is good].

O: *um ne.*
 *** *um ne*
 *** *Mm ne*
 Mm ne.

This riddle is clearly a metaphorical and oppositional riddle. The question is posed as something which is metaphorically similar in nature to the intended answer, i.e. a car which can run back and forth along the street is similar to a saw which can run up and down the wood it is cutting, but it differs from a car in that one cannot run one's fingers down it lest one's hand is cut.

Riddles from Uab Meto

Most Uab Meto riddling seems to be metaphorical in nature. All of the example questions given here involve personification of the intended answers. The examples are from Neonbasu (2011).

(7) Question *Atoni mese fe an ana hitat hobe*
 person one time LOC child we nurture

me kalu na'nae hit taen tasait ne
 but if adult we run leave.behind 3s

'There is someone who when it is a child we nurture it, but when it is fully grown we run away from it.'

Answer *aija*
 'Fire'

(8) Question *Atoni mese lei kala namaunu beo*
 person one DEM if become crazy
 'this person when he becomes crazy...'

sa'sa nbi in matna nah naen sin
 'they eat whatever there is around them.'

ma hit kanabei tpaumake
 and we not.able get.close
 'And we can't go anywhere near them.'

Answer *mnoutsa, ai putsa*
 'a scrub fire'

(9) Question *Atoni mese hit tapen'e hit tite*
 person one we look we see

me in ka nit kit fa
 but 3s DEM NEG us see
 'But when they look at us they can't see us.'

Answer *nnion'a*
 'A mirror.'

More examples from other languages and elucidation of riddle structures

Unfortunately, I have been unable to complete these sections in time for them to be included in the version of the paper which appears in the pre-published proceedings of the conference. The interested reader will have to wait for the presentation and eventual publication of a final version of this paper to see them.

Conclusions

Riddling appears to be a very widespread phenomenon across Indonesia even if it is little remarked upon. Contemporary riddles from Indonesian show that modern traditions of riddling seem to have borrowed many of their fundamental features from European joking riddle traditions and are usually rather literal and generally non-oppositional in nature. Village traditions of riddling in the east seem to have retained more archaic features and a richer variety of riddle types. The full richness of the traditional riddle genres, including metaphorical as well as literal riddles, and with oppositional and

other features is clearly being eroded, and as with so many other aspects of traditional culture across the archipelago needs to be recorded more fully now before much of its former richness is lost.

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